

### **The Stunning story.**

It was 1986. I was unemployed and sharing a flat off the South Circular Rd. in Dublin. The city was bursting with musicians and the Underground, a tiny music venue on Dame St. was a regular hangout. Here, bands such as Something Happens, Real Wild West, A House, The Subterraneans, The Golden Horde, The Swinging Swine, Blue in Heaven and countless others played to a packed house of biker jackets, donkey jackets, pierced ears, quiffs and outsized suits. I decided I had to start my own band. You didn't have to do an interview or fill in an application form. You just decided and you told everyone. I placed an ad in Hot Press magazine and auditions were held in Aidan Walsh's Temple Bar rehearsal studios - but the band sort of fell into place weeks later in Galway where I had previously been a student for three years.

Cormac Dunne of Ballybofey, Co. Donegal had great taste in music, a degree in Archaeology and he punned non-stop (hence the nickname Corny). We had both been members of a band called New Testament and he was the best drummer I knew. Derek Murray, another Donegal native, had a music shop in Galway where he sold secondhand instruments and records while putting himself through college. I bought my first electric guitar there. He used to sit behind the counter and solo along to Johnny Guitar Watson records while I pretended to be a customer avidly reading record sleeves. His playing was amazing and one day I asked him to join the new band. He said he'd give it a wee go. Joe had taken a year out of Art College to see Europe. I really wanted him in the band, as we had the same taste in music and unlike other musical siblings, we got on well. He was somewhere in Switzerland when I wrote to him asking would he come home and learn how to play the bass guitar. He was home within a month, fit, healthy and ready to rock. I had this notion of the band being really big, with a huge sound, a sort of nouveau showband. An ad was placed in a local paper and the first three brass musicians that answered it were all hired on the spot. Jim Higgins on trumpet, Donal Duggan on sax and Paddy Schutte on trombone. We called them the Brass Monkeys, as they were just three precocious kids just about to do their final school exams. As if seven wasn't enough we then decided we needed keyboards to fully complement our sound! Ronan Kavanagh, a medical student with a huge sense of melody and a tiny synthesizer was offered the job. It was sometime in 1987 and The Stunning were born.

We all shared a big old farmhouse with friends where we rehearsed and partied and took turns to cook. Most times it was spaghetti bolognese. We even had a pony in the garden called Trigger and in the back yard we devised a new game SocFu, a cross between Kung Fu and soccer. Casualties were often high. The house was full of everyone's records. Derek had become a renowned DJ and ran a successful club called the Soul Solution. He had a vast collection of soul and blues and reggae records and we started learning songs by the likes of Archie Bell and the Drells, Koko Taylor and Lee Dorsey. Then there were mine and Joe's albums (some borrowed from our mother): Dionne Warwick, Martha and the Vandellas, Elvis Presley, John Lee Hooker, The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Clash, The Smiths, The Doors, Joy Division, Johnny Cash, The Goons. From Cormac's room you could hear the thumping of Iggy Pop, The Ramones, Eddie Cochran and the feedback of the Jesus and Mary Chain. Jimmy was into The Police and Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. But his real love was for old traditional recordings; the more crackle and hiss on the cassette the better. He was now studying music in Cork University and playing the

bodhrán was to become his speciality. I could go on but you get the idea. We were all music mad and it was all we cared about.

Early Stunning gigs were like a potted history in the development of popular music. We never thought much about what direction the band should take. We just played whatever we thought was good, as long as it wasn't too well known. We skipped from blues to country, from soul to guitar tunes, from jazzy to funky. Songs like *'Sockin'1234'* and *'Tighten Up'* were rare soul cuts that we adapted for ourselves. Ben E.King's *'Supernatural Thing'* was a certified floor-filler. Only the real music heads recognized Captain Beefheart's *'Zig Zag Wanderer'*. Our first gig in the Hilltop Hotel in Galway attracted about 50 people, the second one a week later was sold out. I remember it was almost midnight and Paddy the trombonist hadn't showed up. We were due onstage in minutes so I decided to call his house. His mother got out of bed to answer the phone and reluctantly went to wake him. He was still at school and was under lock and key. I heard her running back down the hall to the phone screaming 'he's not in bed and the window's open, where is he!!!' I hung up pronto. Minutes later he turned up backstage, completely out of breath. I waited until after the gig to tell him I'd blown his cover.

Gradually we started to replace the cover versions with original songs. *'Got to Get Away'* our first single; *'Half Past Two'* our second; *'Romeo's on Fire'* our third; *'Brewing up a Storm'* our fourth. Every single was different to the one before. We just made the music and didn't think about what it should be filed under. We played all over the country, in tiny bars, in old dancehalls and on the back of trucks. At one town festival we were playing on the back of a truck when the driver was asked to move it as it was blocking a pub. Nobody told the band, with disastrous consequences. We thought nothing about sitting on our equipment in the back of a small van and driving from Galway to London to do a gig. We brought the music straight to the people wherever they were, live, steaming and sweaty. We sometimes played seven nights in a row and someone once referred to us as the hardest working band in Ireland. In the summer of 1990 we were doing a soundcheck at a venue in Waterford and a message arrived saying that, our debut album *'Paradise in the Picturehouse'* had reached number one. It stayed at number one for 5 weeks and was the first time a debut album by an Irish band had done so. This very album was paid for out of our own hard-earned cash and now all the hard work had paid off. There was no major record company hype, no friends in the music press, no gimmicks and very little money. All those awful journeys back from gigs at five in the morning now seemed worth it. We were the proudest band in Ireland that summer. It went multi-platinum and was to be heard everywhere that year. I meet people now who say they met their partners at Stunning gigs and that our music was a soundtrack to that time in their lives. A band can receive no better compliment than that.

We were together for seven years, had a few more top twenty singles and released another number one album "Once Around the World" as well as a live album "Tightrope". We toured with Bob Dylan and the B52's, then we broke up.

*'Paradise in the Picturehouse'* ceased production around 1993 and I don't think we ever quite realised what it really meant to a lot of people. When the internet age arrived we started to receive dozens of emails from people looking for the album on

CD. As it turned out, in 1990 the bulk of sales were in cassette format and most of them had gotten chewed in car stereos and ghetto blasters. So in 2003 we re-issued it on CD and reformed the band for a tour to promote it. We ended up doing 18 sold out shows around Ireland and the album went straight into the charts at number two. It would've been number one again, but we underestimated the reaction and the 5,000 copies we pressed were gone in just three days. Since then we have to keep pressing it as it just keeps selling.....who knew!

The big eye-opener on that tour was a whole new audience who missed us first time round. People who grew up hearing their older brothers and sisters playing the records but were too young to go to the shows. So we made a decision to do a few gigs every year. The band are much better musicians now than we were in the nineties and we've gained huge experience from playing and recording with other artists.

Over the years some people would say to me "it's a shame The Stunning never made it". That used to really piss me off. What is "making it"? Does that phrase only exist in Ireland, where you have to successfully export yourself before you're deemed worthy? Total strangers have told me they met their wives or husbands at Stunning gigs, I've met people who put their kids to sleep with Half Past Two, people who have played our music at the funeral of a loved one and people who told me that our songs were the soundtrack to their teenage years. That's making it....in my book.

We're older now and can look back fondly on those years. The dreams, expectations and hopes of "making it" are gone and it's for the better. Now we play for the sheer enjoyment of it and what's more - we get paid for it. And....we've been back in the recording studio with a new album on it's way in 2018. So the story continues.

Keep it country.

Steve Wall